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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 001354

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SUBJECT: EIGHT WOMEN SENTENCED FOR EXTREMISM; ANDIJON
EYEWITNESS DISAPPEARS

REF: TASHKENT 2791 05

Classified By: CDA BRAD HANSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D).

11. (C) Summary: On July 9, the Tashkent City Court convicted eight women of membership in the banned religious extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Seven of the women received three-year suspended sentences, while an eighth was sentenced to three years in prison. Human Rights Watch, which monitored the trial, cited several shortcomings. The authorities accused the women of forming a HT cell, but witness testimony demonstrated that some of the women did not know each other. What the women did share in common, though, was that they all have close relatives in prison and they all have served previously as witnesses in other HT-related trials. In a separate incident, Andijon-eyewitness Mahbuba Zakirova reportedly went missing from her home in May, and her current whereabouts remain unknown. End summary.

SEVEN WOMEN GET SUSPENDED SENTENCES; ONE GOES TO JAIL

12. (C) On July 9, the Tashkent City Court convicted eight women between the ages of 27 and 42 of being members of the banned religious group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). Each of the women were charged under several articles of the Criminal Code, including Article 159 (attempting to overthrow the constitutional system of Uzbekistan); Article 244-1 (producing or disseminating materials that represent a threat to public security) and Article 244-2 (organizing or taking part in a banned religious extremist organization). Seven of the women received three-year suspended sentences and were released after they pled partially guilty to some of the charges. The eighth woman, Dilnoza Tokhtakhodjaeva, was found guilty and handed a three-year prison sentence. According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), Tokhtakhodjaeva's lawyer plans to appeal the conviction.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH'S TAKE ON THE TRIAL

13. (C) Poloff met on July 13 with a Human Rights Watch (HRW) officer, who monitored the trial. According to HRW, the eight women were mostly uneducated and from rural areas. HRW is doubtful that any of them are members of HT, and said that the trial was marred by several shortcomings. The eight women were accused of forming a HT "cohort," but it was clear from the trial that several of the women had never met before. Government witnesses also could not identify all of the women. Human rights defender Surat Ikramov, who monitored the trial with HRW, told Poloff on July 16 that relatives of the seven women who pled partially said that they had done so under duress.

14. (C) According to Human Rights Watch, although the women did not all know each other, they all have close relatives in prison. Several of the women would meet with each to offer moral support. Additionally, all of the women have served as witnesses in other HT-related trials. HRW believes that the trial continues a disturbing trend whereby witnesses in HT-related cases are later tried themselves under the same charges. HRW sadly predicts that many of the witnesses from this trial will find themselves in the docket before too long.

15. (C) When asked by Poloff, the HRW officer listed possible reasons for why Tokhtakhodjaeva was the only one of the eight women to be sentenced to prison. First, Tokhtakhodjaeva alone pled not guilty to all of the charges against her. Second, Tokhtakhodjaeva was the only woman from Tashkent, and may have been seen by the authorities as more of a threat for that reason. Third, many of Tokhtakhodjaeva's close relatives are in prison. Her first husband died in prison after being convicted of HT membership, while her second husband, father and mother-in-law are currently in prison on the same charge. Ikramov added that after the trial, Tokhtakhodjaeva's mother and sister were also briefly detained.

MISSING ANDIJON EYEWITNESS

16. (C) HRW and Ikramov said that they had no information about the reported disappearance in May of Andijon-eyewitness Mahbubi Zakirova. On October 14, 2005, Zakirova testified at an Andijon-related trial that government troops first opened fire on protesters (reftel). Her disappearance from her home in Andijon was reported by Deutsche Welle on July 11. Our

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HRW contact said that HRW would investigate the incident. Ikramov blamed the Government for her disappearance, and said that he knew of at least 300 other cases where critics of the regime have simply vanished. On July 18, Poloff met with a representative of Ezgulik, a human rights organization affiliated with the Birlik opposition party. The representative said that Ezgulik's volunteers in Andijon have been asked to contact Zakirova's relatives and local mahalla leaders. On July 18, Ezgulik also sent a letter to the Ministry of Internal Affairs inquiring about her disappearance.

Comment

17. (C) A July 11 article from Radio Free Europe, referencing the trial of the eight women, reports that Hizb ut-Tahrir is gaining greater support among women in Central Asia. We have seen no evidence of this. GOU trials of supposed HT adherents should never be taken at face value. Based on Human Rights Watch's description of the trial, we believe that the Government failed to convincingly demonstrate that the women belonged to a HT cell. Most likely, the women were chosen for prosecution because they all have close relatives in prison and have served as witnesses in other HT-related trials, and therefore, are seen by the Government as guilty by association.

18. (C) Regarding the apparent disappearance of Mahbuba Zakirova, we will continue to track the case. While it is possible that Zakirova is being held somewhere by the Government for trial at a later date, it is also possible that Zakirova has left Uzbekistan to claim refugee status elsewhere. According to press reports, after Andijon, Zakirova fled Uzbekistan briefly for Kyrgyzstan. It is therefore possible that she has returned there. We certainly hope that Ikramov is wrong in suggesting that Zakirova has disappeared for good, although that also cannot be discounted as a possibility.

HANSON